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SUBJECT: SAO PAULO'S ARCHBISHOP ON SOCIAL ISSUES

REF: (A) SAO PAULO 464; (B) SAO PAULO 250

¶1. (U) In a recent courtesy call, Consul General (CG) sought the views of Dom Odilo Pedro Scherer, Archbishop of Sao Paulo, on a range of issues in Brazil's political life and on the role of the Church in Brazil and Latin America. Dom Odilo, who replaced Cardinal Claudio Hummes in late April, and who will himself be elevated to the College of Cardinals next month, commented that the Pope's five-day visit to Sao Paulo in May (ref A) was "short but intense." In reality, he said, there are two Popes, the media Pope and the real one. Pope Benedict is much different in person than his public image would suggest, he added, much warmer and more personable and engaging.

¶2. (U) Addressing issues facing the Church in Brazil and the region, Archbishop Scherer noted that attendance at Sunday Mass, though still low, has increased in recent years, though the shortage of clergy remains a problem. Brazilian laws prohibiting public subsidies to religious education make it difficult to sustain Catholic schools; these schools can offer quality education, he noted, but because their cost per student is higher, poor families cannot afford to send their children to Catholic schools. Liberation theology has lost some of its force and meaning in recent years and no longer poses a serious problem, in Scherer's view. On the other hand, the growth of evangelical movements in Brazil and elsewhere in the region is of concern. Many Catholics leave the Church to join evangelical congregations, he said, in part because the Church has failed in its mission to deepen people's faith and strengthen their sense of belonging to the Church.

¶3. (U) The Archbishop, who served previously as Secretary-General of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB), stressed that the Church does not have a political mission. It is not affiliated with any political party and does not embrace any ideology. It acts rather as a moral and ethical force in society. The challenge, he said, is to make its voice heard. Mainstream media, at least in Brazil, tend to silence the Church, he asserted, not out of a censorship mentality but because of market forces; the Church's message is not perceived as likely to sell advertising or

improve ratings, so it is sometimes ignored or buried. This requires the Church to find its own modes and vehicles of expression as a public voice. Contrast this, he suggested, with "Rede Record," a television network established and owned by Bishop Edir Macedo, founder and leader of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD in Portuguese), Brazil's largest Pentecostal organization. Founded in 1989, Rede Record recently passed SBT to become Brazil's second-largest TV network in terms of audience, after the mammoth Rede Globo. Earlier this month, TV Record launched "Record News," Brazil's first 24-hour news channel. In Scherer's view, the network operates as commercial enterprise but also serves as a vehicle to advance the interests of the Pentecostal church in Brazil. According to press reports, the Universal Church buys 300 million Reals (about USD 160 million) of programming from TV Record.

¶4. (U) In addition to its social and pastoral work with the poor, the elderly, prisoners, and other marginalized individuals and groups, the Church is active in combating public corruption, Archbishop Scherer said. It is not clear whether corruption in Brazil has increased in recent years; more likely, he averred, more corruption comes to light because vigilance has increased. More wrongdoers are exposed by the media or identified by the police and are tried, convicted, and punished. Increasingly, public figures who trumpet their morals are found to be corrupt. Of yet more concern is the corruption found in the justice system, because it undermines people's trust in democratic institutions. Here again, though, there has been a marked increase in investigations of judges. Corruption, he said, is less tolerated than it used to be.

¶5. (U) Asked about "Bolsa Familia" (BF), the Lula administration's flagship conditional cash transfer program for the poor, Dom Odilo said the initiative has had contradictory effects. On the plus

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side, the cash stipend concretely helps very poor families and causes more money to circulate in impoverished communities and funds small initiatives. If families meet the conditions - keeping their children in school and ensuring they get their vaccinations - it could also have long-term benefits. However, in some cases the monthly stipends foster dependency on the part of recipients. Worse yet, the program's close association with the federal government and ruling party has turned it into an electoral instrument, distorting the political system.

¶6. (U) Comment: Archbishop Scherer - slated to become a Cardinal next month - presides over the world's third largest Catholic archdiocese, a metropolitan area of significant economic and political clout which also suffers from extensive poverty, violent crime, and other social ills. The Church, which was widely recognized during and after the military dictatorship for its important role in defending human rights and advocating for democracy, has lost some of its political stature in recent years, but remains a relevant opinion leader on the challenges facing contemporary Brazilian society. End Comment.

¶7. (U) This cable was cleared by Embassy Brasilia.

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